

Personal Perspective

Please Look After This Bear: A Story of Love, Courage, Growth, and Understanding

By Zulmara Cline

The other day on the radio, I heard a white male talk show host discussing the “awful” plight of Latinas because their families don’t expect them to achieve and don’t have goals for their girls to go to do well in school and go to college. He believed that all Latino families wanted their girls to start families and be good mothers, aspiring to nothing else.

I had to smile—he was so right, but yet he was also so wrong. He did not understand what our families want for us and why. He did not understand the strength and courage our culture provides for us and how. He did, however, lead me down memory lane to the day when I discovered what he did not know.

The Bear #1

She came into my room gingerly holding a package in her hands and sat on my bed shedding quiet tears as I made my way around to her. Walking slowly to where she sat, I kept wondering, “What can I say?” “What can I do?” All the time thinking, “If I am not strong now, I’ll never make it. This is MY moment of truth. I need to be strong for both of us right now, or I will never get out of here. I will never have a chance to explore my potential.”

Holding back my own tears, I sat down beside her and put my arms around her shoulders. I told her everything would be fine, I would always be her daughter. I would still take care of her, but I needed to do this. She said, “I know. I love you and I’m so proud of you. I know that going to college has been a dream of ours for years. I am

going to miss you, but I want you to know that I love you, no matter what, and I understand why you have to go. I am so proud of you.”

At that moment, my mom tenderly handed me the package she held so delicately in her hands. I took the gift and opened it slowly wondering what else she had gotten me after the towels, linens, calculator, and dictionary. It was a raggedy, forlorn looking Paddington bear. One with an oversize yellow hat, a blue overcoat, and a tag, *Please Look After This Bear*.

My own tears, held in check for so many days now, flowed freely. For the past four years, since my dad had left, I had been looking after my mom and little sister. She suddenly thrust into the role of breadwinner and me into the role of caretaker. I had cooked, cleaned, babysat, baked goodies for the bakesale, helped my little sister with homework, and attended school functions.

She said to me, “Please, look after this bear, take good care of it, and if the bear ever needs anything, let me know.” We both knew she was talking about me, we both knew she wanted me to take good care of myself as I ventured forth into unknown territory. As I took steps to become my own person, not by getting married as my mom had done, but by going to the University, as no one else in our family had done.

The bear would become a symbol of our bond, of our love, and of our growth, as mother and daughter—as I went forth into the world of academia, a world unfamiliar to my mother, to my family. She would frequently call and ask me how the bear was doing. I had the bear on the my bed, as a constant reminder of the love of a mother who did not understand all that was happening in her daughter’s life, but, who in her own way, was trying to be extremely supportive of her wayward daughter’s endeavor, of her dreams.

We had a good cry, my mom and I, that evening, the last evening I would be at home, the last time I would be her little girl. The next morning, I was setting off for the University—to become what I was meant to become, to follow my dream of graduating from the university. My mom would stay behind. Forever believing she had done the right thing, forever wondering if she should have done something differently.

Bear #2

The festivities had died down and almost everyone had left. My mom, in all her splendor, had been a wonderful hostess and was as proud as could be, the daughter who she had sent away to college so many years ago had graduated with her doctorate degree. She called me to the couch to sit by her and she held out a package. With a questioning look in my eyes, I smiled as I took the package—she had already given me my Ph.D. hood during the ceremony earlier today.

She said, “Open it.” With a sly smile on her face. It was a finely dressed Paddington Bear with a fine red hat, an evening coat, and a tag, *Please Look After This Bear*. She said, “remember when you went away to college so many years ago and I gave you a Paddington Bear that was sort of raggedy looking?” I said, “Of course, I still have that bear and he is still very special to me. He helped me through some very trying times. When the going got tough, I would look at that Bear and know that YOU believed in me and that gave me the spirit to keep going, no matter what. The courage to pursue my dream.”

“Well, now that you are a doctor, I thought you needed a finer bear to look after, as you go off to tackle the world. Remember to always look after this bear and take very good care of it.” We laughed and reminisced about a time long ago when

*Zulmara Cline
is an associate professor
in the College of Education
at California State University, San Marcos,
San Marcos, California.*

we were crying over the same issue, the same bear. We had come a long way, my mother and I. With a daughter who had now earned her doctorate, in the United States, my mother, an immigrant of so many years ago, was beginning to understand. I loved her dearly and I was so very proud of her and the courage that she had shown all of my life. Through all of the ups and downs, her faith and belief in me had never wavered. She knew I would make it. She was always there to lend a hand with baby-sitting, cooking a meal, and just generally looking after my family as I pursued my dreams.

Bear #3

The house was all packed, we were ready to go and my mom was once again hosting a party. This time, my farewell party. After living in the same town for 15 years, I had accepted a position at a University five hours away. I would be moving out of the town that had become a family town for us over the years. It was the place where two of my children were born, where I moved my mom and my sister after I graduated with my teaching credential, where two of my sisters lived with their families, and where my aunt and cousin had moved to a few years ago to be closer to family—it was our family town.

This was the place where I had purchased my mother her own home with a fireplace, helping her fulfill a dream she had had ever since she was a little girl. This is where we had formed many bonds, many memories, many good times, and now I was leaving to become a professor at a University five hours away.

After all the gifts were opened, my mother took out a finely wrapped box. It was beautiful and she came over to me, tears flowing freely as she told the assembled guests, "When my baby went off to college so many years ago, I gave her a Paddington Bear. He was sort of scruffy looking and sort of sad and he had a tag that said, *Please Look After This Bear* and she did and she graduated with her teaching credential. Years later, when she finished her doctorate, I gave her another Paddington bear. This one was better dressed to show that he had made it and was going places in his life. Again, I said to her, *Please Look After This Bear*; and she did and now look at her—all ready to become a professor."

She handed me the package and waited patiently as I opened it—Another Paddington bear—this time dressed in a tuxedo and looking like he had really MADE IT. With the same tag, *Please Look After This Bear*.

"This," she said, "is a bear that has it all and is now making his way in the world to help others."

She said to me, "I will miss you greatly, not having you here, but I am so proud of you. Please, look after this bear just as much as you did the other two." With tears streaming down my face, I gave my mom a hug—the bond complete, the understanding there, the love flowing. My mom, in all her grandeur, had come full circle. We were one—both of us understanding the courage and sacrifice it had taken to get us to this point in our lives. As two Latinas who had to reconcile cultural differences, we had done a pretty good job.

A Loving Foundation

As a Latina, I grew up in a world of very different expectations. Expectations that I would be a good wife and mother someday. Expectations that I would someday be the keeper of family traditions, the holder of the beliefs and values that were an integral part of our family heritage and culture. The expectation that I would learn how to cook and support my husband's efforts to care for the family. I was expected to be the stereotype the talk show host was speaking about.

I, on the other hand, had different expectations for myself. I had dreams that went beyond what my family, my community, my culture had in mind. I wanted a career, I wanted to be my own person, I wanted freedom, and I especially wanted to attend the University and get an education. I knew it would not be easy. We had no money for me to go to college, my parents were not sure why I wanted to go, and since I had moved around so often, I did not have any teachers or counselors who were mentoring me. I knew that if my dreams were to become a reality, I would have to do it on my own.

My relationship with my family, although based on a loving foundation, was somewhat strained. They could not understand my need to make a life for myself, my determination to succeed in a different way, or my desire to be more than a wife and mother. They could not understand why I had to leave home, what I would become when I came back, if I would come back. Their fears, especially my mom's, were many—will she be ashamed of the family, will she still want to spend time with us? Will she be smarter than me? Will she still be my daughter? Her fears were real, her concerns many. Although I sensed she tried to understand, I knew at some level, it was as difficult for her to let me go, as it was for

me to leave. I knew that my mother, in spite of her fears and lack of understanding, believed in me and in my dreams. I knew that at some level, she truly wanted all of my dreams to come true, she was rooting for me in her own way.

Latinas

For Latinas, it is a doubly hard journey to break with tradition, because our families may be willing to let our brothers go, but when it comes to the girls, it is a different story. The expectations are different, the goals are not the same. The dreams are for intact, big, healthy, families all looking to and depending on "mamá" for their survival. When we decide to pursue a different path, it is a break with many years of traditions, beliefs, and values.

We are forging a new heritage, it is not the norm nor the culture for women to go out and seek their place in the world. It is threatening to our fathers, who see their authority whittled away and fail to understand the need for their daughters to be more than a MOM. It is especially hard for our mothers, for our venturing forth becomes almost a comparison of a life not lived, opportunities not taken, dreams not fulfilled. We, as Latinas, need to be careful that we do not reject the way of life our mothers chose—and instead honor and respect them for the women they chose to be, for the foundation they laid for us to build our dreams upon.

Young Latinas need to learn how to resist family and community expectations that are confining, while at the same time continue to embrace a protective family environment. We need to learn to resist a culture, a tradition, a heritage, an ancestry which defines us by our gender and places limits on how far we can go based on our femininity. However, Latinas also need to continue to honor a legacy of strength, love, caring, and bonding that has held our culture together for many decades, through untold adversity. It is a legacy of truth that has allowed our families and our communities to thrive. For it is only in finding this balance that we can achieve true happiness and harmony in our own lives.

We can't make it without our family and community beside us, we need their love and guidance. We can't achieve without mom believing in us and rooting for us. Furthermore, the victory of success becomes hollow, the dream almost meaningless, when we are not sharing our accomplishments with our loved ones. We need to learn not only to pull away from a defining cul-

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ture, but to also appreciate the strength and foundations that our culture has to offer. This strength is based on family bonds that make us strong, help us grow, and give us courage to keep going in spite of it all.

It took me years to realize what my mother had done for me through all of her support and love. It took me years to understand her own fears and doubts about her daughter going off into the unknown. It took me years to appreciate the culture that gave her the strength to let me go and pull me back, the culture that provided her the depth of spirit to recognize that her daughter needed to make her own path, follow her own journey.

We have grown incredibly close, my mother and I. However, she still cannot understand why I buy ready-made foods and spend my time at the computer rather than in the kitchen. She cannot understand why I don't spend hours cooking a Thanksgiving dinner, she cannot understand why I have not taught my children how to cook (she has taken over that task, that's what grandmothers are for, she now says).

However, she understands that I am becoming the person I was meant to be and she is determined, in her own way, to *Look After This Bear and Her Brood*. She has become my life support. Without her, I never would have made it, without her by my side, any victory would have been hallow.

Personal Reflection

I have learned a lot through the years. I have learned that my culture does try to define me based on my gender, however, it

is a definition of strength and courage. I have also learned that I need to define myself as a woman, in spite of my cultural heritage; however, it is because of my culture, that I will make it. It is in defining myself as a Latina that I have been able to grow strong for myself and my family.

I cannot reject the culture and the heritage that are an integral part of my being. It is who I am and there are many parts of the Latina legacy that I have incorporated in my life, some out of necessity, others out of love and respect. It took me years to realize what my culture could do for me, for as a Latina, I was expected to be strong, courageous, and stouthearted. I was expected to embody the characteristics of love, kindness, strength, and devotion to my family and to my community.

My mother, a true Latina, showed the courage and faith that only a Latina possesses as she set aside her own fears and found the strength, deep within her heart, to give me what I needed to venture forth on my own, into a life, a time, a journey she did not understand, to fulfill my own dreams. My mother, a Latina through and through, had the bravado to let me go, and then to make a space for me to come back.

Now, as I counsel young Latinas, I share my experience. I especially want them to understand that it is important for them to honor the legacy that is theirs as Latinas. I share with them that it is essential that they stay connected, stay in touch, keep in contact with their cultural roots. It is important that they not forget their roots, who they are and where they come from. For it is only in returning to our roots that we can truly make it and be free. It is only in forging bonds with our families that the victories

become real. It is only in honoring the past that we can forge a new future for ourselves, our daughters, our communities, and our culture.

Afterthoughts

I still have my three Paddington Bears—they grace my bedroom next to my bed. They are a constant reminder to me of the depth of a mother's love who had truly given me wings and given me roots. Wings to dream of becoming who I could become. Roots to allow me to soar, and still be anchored.

Yes, it took me a while to appreciate all my mom has done for me and the sacrifices she had made—but, I know she had the courage to do what she did, because she, like me, is a Latina. A Latina that has taken all that is good about her life and her culture and channeled that energy into loving and supporting her family. It is within our cultural legacy that we will find the courage to become the individuals we were meant to be and to inspire others to do the same.

Yes, I did have a smile on my face that day listening to the radio—this man had obviously never met my mother.

